

Turning the page on rage

By Ruth Ostrow

"OUR grief has turned to anger, and our anger to resolve." These powerful words were spoken by President George W. Bush recently to wild applause, following attacks on the US. But around the world, use of "the dirty A word" has thrown many in the spiritual and psychological fraternities into chaos.

For debate has been raging over the past two decades about anger and whether it is ever appropriate to feel and express this dark emotion.

It seems from my research that opinion is sharply divided on the issue of rage.

There is the camp that believes anger should not be entertained at any cost. That there is no such thing as justifiable anger. That superior or evolved human beings must rise above this negative feeling towards the higher forces of forgiveness and compassion.

For instance, last week I wrote about Rabbi Laibl Wolf, who quoted the ancient mystical system, the cabbala, in saying that anger is poison. The truest incarnate of evil. That if someone is causing hurt, they are hurting, and the appropriate response is to show empathy and healing. Anger will only beget more anger and more evil.

The other school of psychotherapeutic thought believes we should allow ourselves to feel our feelings deeply, all of them.

Bestselling US psychologist, Harriet G. Lerner, in her classic *The Dance of Anger* (HarperCollins, 1986) says: "Anger is a signal and one worth listening to. Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt and that our rights are being violated. That our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right.

"Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing an important emotional issue in our lives, or that too much of our self ... is being compromised in a relationship. Just as physical pain tells us to take our hand off the hot stove, the pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our self."

She says society makes us question, "Is my anger legitimate? Do I have the right to be angry?" But she says: "Anger is neither legitimate nor illegitimate. It's like asking: `Do I have a right to be thirsty?'"

She says the better question is: "What am I really angry about?" or "Am I taking full responsibility for my anger instead of blaming someone else?" And she urges people to find the right response, one that heals rather than exacerbates the anger.

Both approaches show wisdom, so which is correct? Last week I heard an intelligent bit of information that helped me realise that the controversy is compounded by the limitations of the English language - which is deficient in describing strong emotions.

For instance, in cabbalistic wisdom there are dozens of different words to describe the state of anger, largely because the ancient Hebrews who studied this system were nomads going from country to country, and they needed a deep understanding of aggressive human emotions to help them survive.

There is a childish form of anger that comes from a wounded ego, anger that is more tinged with sadness, a justifiable anger that comes from a moral wrong being perpetrated against you, the anger of unrequited love, and so forth.

This is similar to the Inuit who are said to have 50 words for snow to help them survive their environment, or the Latins who have many different words for love: erotic love or Eros; friendly love; etc.

So both schools of thought have their place, requiring the fine human skill of discrimination to be used. Obviously, childish egocentricity or petulant anger requires a move to forgiveness. And Bush is correct in galvanising his nation into action following a moral injustice.

The million-dollar question is: What action is appropriate in dealing with the dark emotion of anger?

Lerner maintains: "Venting anger does not solve it ... [and] may even serve to maintain and rigidify the old rules and patterns in a relationship."

She urges people to take responsibility for changing the "dance of anger" by stopping trying to punish, teach or change the other party and instead changing their own steps. If one party is dancing to a different beat then the dance automatically changes - as in the non-violent protests of Gandhi.

She argues that if we use anger to help us communicate our needs clearly, without hysteria, and set boundaries for ourselves, then the cycle of resentment will be broken.

This may or may not be the way to deal with global terrorism. But each of us is a microcosm of the macrocosm, and I'm convinced that if we learn to manage our lives, we can, together with our children, each by each, slowly, change the world.

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